[W. M. Prece]

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Folk Stuff - Range Lore

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Rangelore,

Tarrant Co., Dist. #7

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FEC [41?]

W.M. Prece, 70, living at Baird, Tex., R.F.D.#2, was born Jan. 5, 1868, at Jackson, Miss. The Prece family immigrated to Texas in 1878, and settled in Callahan co. The family's means of transportation was a covered wagon pulled by an ox team. After arriving in Texas, W.M. Prece started his range career. He secured a job working for M.S. Smitson, who owned a large number of cattle, and had his cowcamp located on the [Conaho?] River, 75 miles west of San Angelo, Tex. After working as a cowboy for several years, Prece made several cattle drives to the North. His story:

“I was born in Miss., near Jackson, on a plantation, Jan. 5, 1868. The Civil War left my family in bad shape and my folks decided to go West, to the frontier of Texas, and try to make a new start.

“We started to Texas [1878?]. I was 10 years old at the time. The family loaded our belongings in a covered wagon and hitched old Dave and Buck, our two oxen, to the rig and headed West. We crossed the State of Louisiana, and continued westward after crossing the border of this state, until we arrived in Callahan county

“While making the trip, we had plenty of time to get a good look at the country we traveled through, because we traveled only about 20 miles a day. What we called roads these days were trails. In fact, most of the people referred to the highways as “the trail”.

“There were not many bridges. If a stream could be forded, during its normal stage, no built was built to cross on. Then, if one arrived during a rise, well you just waited till the water lowered. If the stream was too deep for fording, then, in most places, a ferry operated to carry traffic across. [C12 - 2/11/41 - Texas

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“During the course of our trip to Texas, several times we were compelled to wait a few days for the stream to lower, before we could cross it. During such days we would camp, of course, by the stream and spend our time foraging for wild game to supplement our food supply. Also, do repair work on the wagon or other parts of our equipment.

“We had to contend with wet weather at times, and then the roads; in places, were boggy. This condition caused trouble and delay. We became stuck a couple times so bad that it required nearly a whole day to pull out.

“Father was headed for the frontier, and he surely succeeded in finding one. The place he settled was truly a frontier at that time. It was in the Concho River bottoms, west of San Angelo. We built a log shack on a tract of land which we/ had negotiated for. We also cleared a patch of land to cultivate and plant to foodstuffs.. This patch we fenced with a split rail fence, to keep out the deer, buffalo and other destructive wild beasts, as well as the cattle which grazed on the free and open range of the territory.

“All the country of the district was a free range. There were just a few patches of cultivated land, here and there, that were fenced. The little home places were occupied by men with families.

“It was very evident to everyone in the Conoke River District that the cow business was about the only thing one could make a living at.

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“I was not able to ride a hoss at the time of our arrival in Texas, because my father worked even back in Miss. I could ride an ox, but they were useless for cow work. So, I was anxious to learn how to ride a hoss and be a cowhand. My father needed work to earn money for the care of his family, and he equipped himself for a cowhand. He bought a couple of saddle hosses and I began to learn riding.

“After my father bought the hosses, it did not take me long to learn to ride. It came to me sort of natural. In six months time I was quite pert at riding. I also practiced handling a lasso, during the period I was learning to ride.

“After six months of getting myself ready, I set out to find a job with a cowcamp. I was given a job by M.S. Smitson. He had his headquarters camp 75 miles west of San Angelo, located on the middle Concho River, and ranged around 30,000 head of cattle.

“The country was rough, being full of hills and valleys. The cattle grazed, for the most part, in the valleys.

“My first job was riding over the range section keeping my eyes open for troubled critters. These longhorns were always getting ripped by a horn, also, getting cuts from stubs of brush limbs. These cuts had to receive attention, to prevent screw worms from developing.

“The outfit made a salve out of axle grease and turpentine, and we daubed this concoction in the cuts. If worms had developed 4 the concoction would kill the vermin.

“I had to rope and hog-tie the critters, in order to daub the cuts. To do this, I threw the loop on the animal's feet or leg. This catch would flop the animal on the ground quickly. When it hit the ground, the hoss held the rope taut. While the critter was in this position, I would

loop the other leg and then do the daubing. There were three of us young waddies working steadily, giving our attention to the injured, sick and bogged animals.

“In the river bottoms, there were places where bogs existed, and were bad, especially during wet weather. Us young waddies watched the boggy places for bogged animals. When we discovered one, we would put a loop over its head and fasten the rope to the nub of the saddle, then let the hoss pull the critter out.

“The outfit had a crew of range riders, whose job was to keep the herd from wandering beyond a certain territory. They did not herd the critters, in the full sense of the word, but held the animals from drifting to where they might mix with some other cattle.

“The cattle would always return to their bedding ground at night, at which place we kept salt licks, if they did not drift to where they would mix with other stock. If they did, during their grazing, they would often follow the other cattle to a strange bedding ground.

“Of course, cattle which strayed of would not be lost, because during the general roundup the animals would be located. 5 However, if a rancher did not watch for drifters, in time his heard would all be mixed with other herds in the territory.

“'There were sale critters to be cut out, or being held separated almost all the time. Some of the boys were either cutting out or holding a herd separated, while critters were being gathered for a drive to market or other places.

“The work I have so far described was work done on the ranch between the general roundups. The general roundups were held twice each year, in the spring and fall. These two roundups kept the main part of our crew, of from 30 to 40 men, busy about six months of the year.

“The method adopted by all the camps in handling the round-ups was to first place the various crews under one boss, who was known as the 'roundup boss'. In addition, there

were 'reps', that is representatives from different outfits. At the same time there would be 'reps' from camps in our territory, at roundups taking place in distant territory.

“The Concho River territory took in all the section west and north of San Angelo, to Midland and Big Springs.

“The entire roundup outfit was under the direction of the roundup boss. Generally, in our section, Jack Rogers, Smithson's range boss, was the man appointed to have charge of the roundups. The boss directed all work and gave riding orders to the swing crew relating to the territory to be worked each day. After the section within a radius of 25 to 30 miles had been worked, the camp would move up, and we would so continue until the entire range section was covered. 6 “The outfit was divided into a number of crews. One was the swing crew, one the cutting and branding crew, and the line riders. Also, the hoss wranglers, and chuck wagon crews, which were under the direction of the cooks.

“The work of the various crew was as follows:

“The swing crew were the fellows who rode over the definite section each day, and gathered in all the cattle. The critters gathered each day were driven to the headquarters, and there turned over to the crew of line riders. These line riders held the animals until the herd was worked.

“After the swing crew arrived with their days's gathering, they were through for the day. They would arrive at various times in the evening, depending on the distance and the number of cattle they found to drive in.

“The swing crew started early and would have to travel from a few miles to around 20, before they would start gathering critters. Each morning, the waddies working in the swing would saddle their mounts before breakfast. They would eat, and as seen as they had finished the swing boss would yell 'ride!' The boys would make a run for their mounts at

the sound of the order. It was a race each morning: first, to be the first man mounted; second, to get into and stay in the lead.

“Generally, the best hosses of each camp's remuda were used for swing work, because each day that the hosses were used, which was about every third day, the hosses had a long, hard drag. Thus, each morning the swing men rode fresh homes, and the waddies 7 would enjoy an excellent race. These riding would enjoy the thrill of the contest, and those matching would enjoy the thrill of watching their favorite win or the mortification of defeat.

“Usually, there were bets made on who would be the winner each morning. Being that fresh hosses were being ridden, it gave us waddies different hosses on which to bet every day. Generally, the bets were small but occasionally there were quite pert wagers. These days, to have the best runner, the best cutting hoss, the best night rider, or the best something else, was the ambition of every waddy. Therefore, a waddy enjoyed a great thrill to win a race, and was mortified if he was the last in the swing run. Also, the boys took great delight in 'kidding' the last man. The rider would be ridiculed as a rider and hoss-man, and the hoss classed as a snail, or remarks of such nature.

“These days, hoss riding was one of the chief sports. There were many hoss races run between the cowhands of different camps. Each camp took great pride out of having the fastest hoss in the territory, and the cowhand who might own it was the envy of the other waddies.

“Now, getting back to the roundup work. The line riders held the critters bunched, which were brought in by the swing crew, until the cutting crews had cut out and brands were put on all yearlings, males castrated, and the count was made.

“There were tallymen who kept account of each brand. Thus, at the close of the roundup, each owner knew how many critters were carrying his brand, and the kind of animals. For instance, 8 the number of males, females, yearlings, two's and so on.

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“The branding crews were made up of branders and men who kept the irons hot.. This crew worked in conjunction with the cutter. The cutting crew was made up of men from each camp working in the roundup. That is to say, each camp had men working as branders and cutters. These cutters would ride in among the unworked herd and cut out their camp's brand, and call for their camp's brander to brand the yearlings found running with a mother cow carrying their brand. Each time a brand was placed on a critter, the brander would call the brand to the tallyman.

“Now, this branding work was where many critters received the wrong brand, because it was not always easy to be certain the yearling belonged to a certain cow. Therefore, the cutters and branders of an outfit which could work the fastest was the outfit which received the best calf crop. However, after all, the system worked the same for all the outfits, and in the end each outfit received what belonged to it.

“The system was about the only one which could be followed where cattle grazed on the open range. Of course, the bulk of each camp's herd was in one bunch, and with his main herd the owner received a 100 per cent count.

“After the gathered herd had been worked, these critters were shifted and held away from the rest.

“The wranglers took care of the remuda. Each cowhand had an average of five hosses for his use during the roundup, and he would alternate hosses each day. So, there were a large number of hosses to look after. 9 The cooks had charge of the chuck wagons. They had helpers to gather fuel and tote water, as well as assist in other work. These were the boys who were up first in the morning, and aroused the others with their yells 'all skunks roll out' or 'the slop is ready'.

“I started to work the cattle drives in 1888. My first drive was under Jack Rogers, as trail boss, for Smitson. We pointed 2,000 big steers towards the Osage Nation near Pence, in

the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). This drive was completed without any unusual incident. We delivered the herd with not more than one per cent less.

“On the drive, we used about 14 waddies. Besides the cook, two wranglers and the trail boss, all the waddies worked as pointers. The term pointer is applied to the men who ride at either side of the herd and keep the critters herded in the proper direction, and also to regulate the speed.

“When driving a herd, the animals are allowed to graze as they move slowly forward, but there are times when it becomes necessary to move the herd forward without grazing. For instance, to reach a certain point by bedding time, or when traveling through where the distance was great between water holes. Under these conditions, the herd was hustled forward.

“When the herd was allowed to graze, the pointers would let the herd spread. That is to say, let the animals more or less scatter. With a 2,000 head herd, we would allow the spread to be a 10 half mile or more in width. Then each critter would have room to graze without interference by other animals. But, when the herd was being moved forward without grazing, the herd would bunch to a width of about two blocks. Or, in other words, the animals would be bunched to where they would travel side by side.

“I am going to jump the usual and ordinary incidents of range life and talk about a real drive of 1893, which I was with. I was working for the McCutchen ranch, located near Alpine, Tex., at the time. Albert Corchrell was McCutchen's trail boss. We had been holding a herd of 35,000 big steers during March of 1893. On the morning of March 15th, Corckrell said: 'Point 'em towards the North Star by the way of Midland and Amarillo.' Of course, everything was ready and the men went into action.

“We drove through many different kinds of country and crossed many small and large streams. After leaving Amarillo, we pointed towards Colorado, and crossed the Arkansas River at Bush. From there, we pointed towards Lusk, Wyo., thence towards Cheyenne,

where we crossed the U.P. Railroad 15 miles east of the town. [?] From here, we pointed towards Laramie where we crossed the South Platte River. We pointed eastward from Laramie and crossed the North Platte River west of Pierre, S. Dak., thence towards Deadwood, S. Dak. and delivered the cattle at the Franklin ranch, located on the Bell Fouchette River, 50 miles north of Deadwood S. Dak. We arrived there and delivered the herd on the 15th day of August, 1893.

“We were five months and five days driving this herd and drove it 1,800 miles. Thus, you see, we averaged around 12 miles a day. Our loss was about 10 per cent. We counted in 3,150 critters, all 11 in good state of flesh condition. The loss was caused mostly by strays which got away during stampedes. A few critters had to be dropped because of sore-foot trouble.

“After the first month of driving, we had very little trouble. This was due to the fact that the critters became accustomed to being driven, and worked more easily. The farther we traveled the more the critters learned to respond to our efforts to guide them. Towards the latter part of the drive, these critters hit the water like a fish, when we arrived at a stream.

“There were two steers which developed into real cowhands. These two animals were always in the lead at the head of the herd. / They seemed to take pride in their position and, luckily, the two animals were on the side of the waddies. They arrived at a state of understanding of what was wanted in the way of movement. For instance, if we were drifting slowly and then for some reason wanted to tighten up and move fast, just as soon as the riders began to yell 'yep-yi', these two leaders would start bawling and moving off at a good pace. These steers must have said, in steer language, 'come fellows, lets get going'. Because, so soon as the animals began their bawl, the whole herd would respond quickly, and began to hit their stride.

“These steers saved us waddies a lot of trouble. After they joined the crew, crossing streams, swimming or fording, was done with very little trouble for the pointers. 12 “One

trouble swimming a stream with a herd, is to keep the animals from floating with the current, especially if the current is a swift one. At such times, a number of pointers would have to swim, their mounts back and forth, on the lower side of the herd, waving slickers and yelling, to turn the swimming critters against the current. At many points it was [necessry?] to keep the critters headed, more or less, straight across, because of the landing place. As a rule, the river's banks were more or less sheer, except at the landing. Therefore, if the critters landed below the proper place, they would be forced to remain in the water too long and, of course, there was danger of the animals becoming exhausted and drowning.

“These two steers seemed to sense what was necessary, and they always took the lead. There was no trouble to herd these two animals to the proper landing, and with their bawling they would cause the rest of the critters to head for the same point.

“The first real swim we had to take was when we crossed the Arkansas River. Before crossing this stream, all other streams were forded. The critters in this herd had not had any swimming experience, and they hesitated to take the deep water. The moment these critters in the lead felt the bottom leaving their feet they wanted to turn back. However, the oncoming herd was in their way, which forced the lead critters on ahead and put the animals to swimming. Riders remained on [?] either side of the herd to keep the critters pointed towards the apposite shore. Riders worked at the rear, who urged the herd on to keep crowding these in front. 13 “It required a great deal of urging and crowding to force the animals across during their first swim, but as one swim followed another the swimming of streams became easier, and finally the animals took to the water readily.

“The route was well known, as many herds had been driven over the route before; but we had to vary to some extent, because of grazing conditions. However, we always made certain bedding grounds by night time, ,and certain watering places as the route provided.

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“As a whole the herd worked exceedingly well, except during storms. Owing to the herd being constantly in strange country, it was more prone to become frightened, and during a storm all hands were compelled to be on duty to hold the critters.

“During a storm, it was impossible to prevent the animals from moving, and we did not attempt to keep them from doing so. We allowed the critters to move, but tried to keep the herd milling, which means traveling in a circle. It the event the herd stampeded, we just let the animals run, but tried to keep them going in a circle.

“We were lucky that we were making this drive, for the greater part, during the summer months when storms were not so frequent. During the entire five months and five days, we experienced only one severe storm. It was during this storm that we lost most of the 10 per cent we were short on delivery.

“We were near the Black Hills of S. Dak., at the time of the severe storm. It broke about midnight, and was an electric storm. Clashes of thunder and flashes of lightning followed one after 14 another. We succeeded in keeping the animals milling until a crash of lightning hit in or near the herd. With the clash the herd was off, and the animals scattered in many directions. There was not enough of us to follow the many different bunches; therefore each rider picked a bunch, and tried to stay with it until they quit running from exhaustion. The rest of the animals were left to go where they desired. After the storm ceased, the rider stayed with their respective bunch till daylight. Then, each waddy drifted his respective bunch back to where he had camped for the night. As the cattle came in, they were held by a few of the hands, while the rest went scouting for the strays.

“We hunted for two days, and secured the country thoroughly, but were unable to find all our strays. We then started with what we had, and, as I mentioned before, when we counted in we were a little over 300 short.

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“Among the ranches I worked for, which were large outfits, was the old 96 ranch located on the Rio Grande River, 50 miles south of Van Horn. It was in 1890 that I worked for the 96 ranch. It was a good outfit to work for and my wages were $40.00 per month. But I had cattle drives in my mind, so [?] stayed only a few months. I preferred the drives to riding the range.

“I quit the range work in 1900 and settled down to farming. Farming has been my occupation since.